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Roger Hilsman
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"A PROD IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION"

Book review by George S. Pettes in magazine ARMY. July 1956, on the book

"Strategic Intelligence and National Decisions", by Roger Hilsman

One of the most interesting outward symbols of the changes in the world in our lifetime, and of the place of the United States in the world, is the growth of intelligence as an activity of our Government. From the tiny roots which existed only twenty years ago there have grown a group of agencies with thousands of employees. It is well understood that these are necessary, and that they bear a very important part in the conduct of American affairs as an active world leader. But they are new, in many ways they are strange to the American scene.

The examination of these intelligence agencies and their role and their work is one of the most interesting avenues of introspection on the whole of the great adaptation which has occurred in American relations to the world. Roger Hilsman has approached the study of intelligence activities in the U.S. Government with the tools of a social scientist as well as the interests of a political scientist. In his concern for the relation of intelligence to policy decisions, sharp attention is given to intelligence in the State Department and to intelligence for the National Security Council, and less attention to military and to some of the other specialized areas in the intelligence field. Hilsman's main concern is to find out what people think intelligence work is, in order to further examine and criticize the existing beliefs on the subject. His approach is effective.

Aside from the main thesis of the book which may have great value but may not have the same meaning to all readers, the book will certainly have great value to all students of intelligence for the survey which it accomplishes incidentally in the course of examining the attitudes of all concerned. Hilsman begins with a short historical summary of the growth of the present system of agencies, with sharp focus on the apparent intentions of the architects of the system. He proceeds to deal with the views of policy makers on the nature and proper functions of intelligence. He then analyzes the attitudes which they expressed to him in a series of analytic interviews. He then examines the attitudes and ideas of the administrators of intelligence agencies, as he finds them in the written record of those of the high intelligence administrators who have left substantial public writings on the subject, namely, Donovan, Vandenberg, Hillenkoetter, McCormack, and Allen Dulles. Next he turns to the working level of people in the intelligence agencies themselves, and finally to those whom he call "the academic observers," namely, those who have attempted more or less serious studies or statements on the nature of the intelligence function, George S. Pettes, Sherman Kent, and Willmoore Kendall.

There are places where this discussion drags, repetitiously, but this reviewer for one finds it pardonable because only by hammering almost ad nauseam can the case be made emphatic that the operators and administrators and the working level share certain attitudes and beliefs and ideas about intelligence which actually amount to a dominant doctrine.

Hilsman's analytic tools are those of a trained social scientist, and they do not lack cutting edge. In examining the prevailing state of mind, his perceptions cut through the superficials and reach the heart of the matter.

There is in our intelligence agencies, and in the larger operating agencies and policy making bodies which they serve, a system of ideas about the nature of intelligence work which makes first class intelligence work nearly impossible. Hilsman's major finding, though he does not state it so baldly, is that the whole system is conditioned by a shallow philosophy. The ideas as to the nature of knowledge, the nature of facts, the usefulness of concepts and theories, and the relation of knowledge to action are too simple. The object of intelligence is conceived as getting facts. Facts are conceived of as neat little propositions which can be gathered like marbles or pebbles. The best worker is the one who gathers the most facts. Putting the facts together involves nothing more complex than the assembling of a jigsaw puzzle in which all the parts must certainly fit together. By implication, the facts are of finite number. So much is this so that it is often assumed that if an intelligence agency obtains all the facts the high officials served can then examine all the facts. In short, Hilsman has applied the sort of technique which Malinowski applied to the culture of the Trobriand Islanders or which Thurman Arnold applied to "the folk lore of intelligence." His chapter on "The Operators and Their Attitudes" contains the most interesting and penetrating analysis of the matter.

His final plea is that "Certainly in the creation of new knowledge, the role of thought is vital," and that "To be rational, the bringer of knowledge should work in a context of policy and action, the implementer should act within a frame of knowledge." One is tempted to quote back at him a remark of Thomas Mann, "One must think like a man of action and act like a man of thought." Our intelligence agencies will be as good as they should when they and the authorities they serve come closer to that standard. Hilsman's book should give them a good prod in the right direction.

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NOTE: Dr. George S. Pettee is on the staff of Operations Research Office of The Johns Hopkins University, and wrote The Future of American Strategic Intelligence (1946).